

Gemma Cirignano In Conversation with Dr. Faustino Quintanilla

Dr. Faustino Quintanilla is the Director of the Queensborough Community College's Art Gallery in Queens, New York. The QCC Gallery boasts an eclectic permanent collection that focuses on ceremonial African objects, Post-war American works on paper, contemporary photography, and pre-Colombian art. In 2007, Dr. Quintanilla acquired the largest collection of Nat Shapiro's works including 74 assorted paintings and drawings, 940 sketches and studies, 433 slides, and five drawing pads for the QCC Gallery's permanent collection. He curated a solo exhibition based on the acquisition in 2014 titled *Nat Shapiro: Selected Works from the Permanent Collection*.

On July 18th, 2022, Gemma Cirignano sat down with Dr. Quintanilla at the QCC Gallery to learn more about the impact Nat Shapiro has had on their permanent collection.

To begin, could you please talk about how you formed a relationship with Nat Shapiro's artwork?

FQ: Mirella called me and visited the QCC Gallery. Nat had passed away a couple of years earlier, so I never met him, but I was immediately interested in his work. It was one of my first years as the Director, and I knew his work would be educational for the students and should be preserved. If you go through our collection, most of the art we have is for study purposes or represents the beginning of an artist's process. Works on paper are much more interesting to me, probably because my background is in drawing and printmaking. I believe drawing is where you develop the ideas you then portray on the canvas.

You visited Shapiro's studio in Yonkers to select the works you acquired. What captivated you about his studio practice?

FQ: The most important aspect of Nat's practice is his drawings and the development of his work. When I went to his studio, I selected all the sketches, drawings, and little geometrical things which eventually became parts of different paintings. Normally, nobody wants those things, but I believe that is where you see how the artist thinks.

I agree that drawings reveal a lot about an artist. Shapiro greatly admired the artist Paul Klee and his approach to drawings reminds me of Klee's diagrams that investigate the origins of forms. Did any drawings or paintings stand out to you when you visited his studio in Yonkers?

FQ: A particularly memorable painting for me was *The Burial*, made with acrylic, sand, and pebbles on untreated linen. It is black, sepia, and white and illustrates a simple drawing of people carrying another human. I fell in love with it.

You curated a solo exhibition of his works in 2014 at the QCC Gallery, and the cohesion of his oeuvre is evident despite his different styles. His use of materials, color, and humor all

make Shapiro's work stand out. What was your process in curating this exhibition, and did you encounter any challenges?

FQ: I brought everything out, and little by little, I started to create relationships between the works or remove works that did not relate. Curators frequently select work because it is good, but the works may not fit well together. That is the risk of being a curator. In the case of Nat's show, it was easy because I knew what I wanted to show: the artist's process. I had enough materials to do it and to fill up the gallery. I selected 40 or 50 drawings and a couple of major works.

In addition to your work as an art historian and Director of the QCC Gallery, you are a priest in the Syrian Orthodox Church. I find your personal and academic interest in theology notable given Shapiro's cynicism towards religion. He was a self-proclaimed atheist, and yet, his work often references biblical imagery and investigates spiritual themes.

FQ: I did not know Nat was an atheist, but truthfully, I prefer people who are against religion to religious people. Faith is something you must study for yourself. If you go to school and listen to the teacher, you start to think your teacher is the only authority of the information that is given to you. Until you make faith part of yourself, and you scrutinize what is right and wrong, religion is just information, nothing else. The value of that is zero to me.

What is atheism to Nat? He says he is an atheist, but at the same time, he is searching for something in his work. He is asking: where do I come from? Where am I going? How do the universe and everybody in it affect my decisions? So, when people say they are atheists, I do not believe them.

Shapiro's curiosity and perhaps his search for something as you put it, reveals itself in the diversity of styles present in his oeuvre. The vast collection of works on paper at the QCC Gallery represents his range of biblical, op art, cubist, color field, and expressionist themes. How do you interpret his exploratory approach to creating art?

FQ: He arrives at his different styles unconsciously. He starts to draw, sees something, and then tries to answer all the questions in his head. Drawing is important because an artist can start with a cow and finish with an elephant. He knew a lot and that is a sign of a good, true artist. The work is influenced by his upbringing, his religion, the society he lived in, his schooling, his friends, his family, and his social empowerment as he grew. Everything influenced him, from the moment he was born until his death. To put him in a category would be an error. Nat was much more interested in the process of thinking and developing his art and his feelings. His work becomes art later because we take it, put it in a frame, and hang it on the wall. I never spoke to the man, but based on what has passed through my hands, that is what I believe.